KANT, IRIGARAY, AND EARTHQUAKES: ADVENTURES IN THE ABYSS

Rachel Jones (George Mason University)

In 1755, Lisbon was destroyed by an earthquake whose aftershocks were felt across Europe. One of the less well-known responses to this abyssal event is that offered by Kant in his three essays on earthquakes and their causes. According to Irigaray, Kant's concern with an earth that moves is not incidental, but central to the emergence of his critical project. The goal of this paper is to trace a line from Kant's earthquake essays, through his later writings on the sublime, to Irigaray's critique of the Kantian project and her positive re-appropriation of a matter that moves, as well as the sublime figure of the abyss. I will suggest that, in her work, the abyss is transformed from a rupturing cleft into a shelter for sexuate difference, and from a site of terror into a space for wonder.

"at Lisbon yawns the abyss"
– Voltaire

In 1755, Lisbon was destroyed by an earthquake whose aftershocks were felt across Europe. These events prompted Kant to write three essays, in which his main aim is to present the best available accounts of the material causes of earthquakes.[1] At the same time, however, he emphasizes that such destructive events teach human beings that the material world should not be their ultimate concern: "perhaps in this way he also learns to see that the goal of all his aspirations should not properly be sought within this playground of

[1] First published in 1756, "*Von den Ursachen der Erderschütterungen*" (hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as E1), "*Geschichte und Naturbeschreibung der merkwürdigsten Vorfälle des Erdbebens*" (hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as E2), and "*M. Immanuel Kants fortgesetzte Betrachtung der seit einiger Zeit wahrgenommenen Erderschütterungen*" (hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as E3) are collected in *Kants Werke: Akademie Textausgabe I: Vorkritische Schriften I 1747–1756* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968), 417–72. Citations in English are my own translations.

13 - RJones_KantIrigarayandEarthquakes_finallayout.pdf 1 3/31/2013 6:18:55 PM

his desires [*dieser Tummelplatz seiner Begierden*]."[2] (E2, 431) The earthquake continues to send tremors through Kant's later writings on the sublime, where man is confronted either by nature's apparently uncontainable infinity or by its awe-inspiring power. In either case, in such an encounter the subject confronts that which is "excessive for the imagination," and which, Kant says, is like "an abyss in which the imagination is afraid to lose itself."[3]

The significance of earthquakes for Kant's project is reinforced by Luce Irigaray's reading of Kant in *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Irigaray suggests that it is the earth's instability that motivates the re-grounding of knowledge in the subject in Kant's so-called Copernican turn:

> It sometimes happens that the sun causes the earth to shake underfoot, and people fear being *turned upside down*, or thrown sickeningly *down into the abyss*, or even flying off into the void. To re-establish the balance that has been so dangerously disturbed, the philosopher decides that from now on nature overall will be put under the control of the human spirit and her origins will be based on her necessary obedience to the law.[4]

For Irigaray, Kant's early concern with an earth that moves is not of merely passing interest, but lies at the heart of the critical project. On the one hand, the possibility that material nature might act in ways that escape the subject's understanding threatens the possibility of objective knowledge, which depends on reconceiving nature herself as a product of the subject's conceptual powers and hence, as necessarily harmonious with those powers. On the other, the possibility of an earth that moves of its own accord and in ways that do not necessarily fit with the subject's conceptual frame continues to haunt Kant's thought, demanding a deduction of the categories that is still not enough to prevent occasional eruptions of a materiality that

---

[2] The "he" that is the subject of this comment refers back to "*der Mensch*." Throughout this article, I have translated Kant's references to "*der Mensch/die Menschen*" as "human," "human beings," "people," or "man," depending on the context. While *der Mensch* does not conflate human beings in general with specifically *male* human beings in as obvious a way as the English "man" or "mankind," in the broader context of Kant's project, it is clear that it is the male subject who is taken as both norm and ideal where human beings are concerned.

[3] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, (tr.) W. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 115 [V: 258]. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CJ.

[4] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, (tr.) G. C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 203, trans. mod.; my emphasis. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as S.

human beings cannot fully master, either physically or cognitively. Hence the necessary supplement of Kant's discussion of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment*, which operates to re-contain the most excessive and threatening of nature's appearances.

From an Irigarayan perspective, it is this anxiety about an active and excessive materiality which is of interest, together with Kant's systematic attempts to contain such excess. Irigaray reads Kant as repeating—in his own, transcendental fashion—a dominant pattern in western metaphysics whereby the possibility of an active and generative materiality is foreclosed via a hylomorphic model in which generative power is ascribed to the forms which are imposed *upon* matter (whether these forms stand outside the world as transcendent Platonic Ideas or are internalized within the subject as the conceptual categories through which nature is constituted as such). As the necessary support and receptacle of form, matter is re-contained as passive and inert, or (as for Kant) as substance that underlies and persists through change. At the same time, because matter is defined as that which (in and of itself) is lacking in form[5], its only discernible activity becomes a negative one of disruption, manifest in those moments when it resists proper forms and erupts into chaotic excess.

Irigaray works to show how this framework forecloses the possibility of an active matter that is generative (that is, capable of engendering forms, rather than merely chaotic), and how this foreclosure is in turn bound up with a denial of the generative powers of the mother, and hence, of our beginnings in birth and a specifically *female* body. For Irigaray, then, to foreclose the possibility of generative materiality is to foreclose the possibility of thinking sexual difference, and in particular, the originary status of sexual difference. Re-thinking the form/matter relation thus becomes an intrinsically feminist project. Reclaiming sexual difference means reclaiming the generative powers of an active mat(t)er in ways that allow us to recognize the specificity of two, different sexes: a female sex shared with the mother and characterized by the capacity to birth, and a male sex embodied by those who are born but who generate without

[5] For Kant, the matter of appearances is "given" to us in sensation, while the subject provides the forms of intuition—space and time—as well as the categories which will allow the matter of sensation to be ordered and thereby constituted as individuated objects of experience. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, (tr.) N. Kemp-Smith (London: MacMillan, 1933), 65–66 [A20/B34].

giving birth themselves.[6] Each sex thus stands in a different relation to the mother (being of the same sex as, or a different sex from, her) in ways that disclose this originary—sexuate—difference[7]: a difference that marks our corporeal being and that means that our being, as human beings, is always and necessarily corporeal.

It is this difference that is lost when the active generativity of matter is seen not as testifying to the material-maternal origins of human beings, but as a threatening otherness which stands outside the subject and endangers its autonomy. Seen through an Irigarayan lens, Kant's concern with the shifting, fluid matter which moves within the earth and sometimes causes violent upheavals can thus be read as a mnemonic trace of the generative movements of maternal matter and the originary upheaval of birth. The trajectory of his later work can in turn be seen as driven by the need to re-contain such disturbing traces along with the powers of a troublingly active matter. In this regard, the image of the abyss serves as a guiding thread, a double-sided figure that runs through Kant's work and that operates both as a figure for the most excessive and threatening powers of material nature and as a means to contain that threat by homogenizing it as formless otherness and absence. In turn, Irigaray critiques the reduction of the generative capacities of matter to no more than a dark abyss that in the end renders sexual difference itself abyssal, an unthinkable absence. She shows how the weight of this absence is borne by woman, whose sex is identified with nothingness and lack in ways that simultaneously signal and disavow her otherness. And yet, for these very reasons, one of Irigaray's strategies for cultivating a philosophy that is attentive to sexuate difference is to reclaim and rework the figure of the abyss.

In this paper, then, my goal is to trace a line from Kant's earthquake essays, through his work on the sublime, to Irigaray's rehabilitation of an earth that moves and her re-appropriation of the figure of the abyss. I will begin by outlining Kant's key concerns in the earthquake essays where the abyss appears as the literal and cata-

---

[6] This does not mean that on Irigaray's model, any *individual* woman must either give birth herself or have the capacity to do so. Rather, to be female is to belong to the sex which births, whether or not one gives birth oneself; that is, to be female is to belong to the same sex as one's mother, and hence, to be in a position to relate to one's mother in a different way than a male child (a daughter can relate to her mother as another woman).

[7] Irigaray uses the word "sexuate" to refer to sexual difference understood as neither biological ("sex") nor as a wholly cultural construction ("gender") but as the originary ontological difference that is expressed in both biological and (if appropriately cultivated) cultural forms.

strophic rupturing of the earth. In the second section, I will examine how Kant seeks in his later work on the sublime to resolve the instabilities that mark these early essays, not least through the internalization of the abyss, which becomes a constitutive cleft between reason and sensibility. I will then discuss Irigaray's critical response to Kant, drawing primarily on *Speculum*, before turning in the final section to one of her later works, *Elemental Passions*.[8] In this short but densely poetic text, Irigaray re-appropriates the sublime figure of the abyss, transforming it from a cleft between man and matter into a shelter for sexuate difference, and from a site of terror into a space for wonder.

Kant on Earthquakes

Kant writes three essays in response to the Lisbon quake, all published in 1756. The essays provide a detailed account of the effects and possible causes of such events, framed by Kant's reflections on the moral and practical lessons to be drawn[9], and his (sometimes scathing) rejection of the more implausible theories that have arisen. As Martin Schönfeld notes, these essays are no longer of particular interest in scientific terms[10]; however, they do fit with what Schönfeld calls Kant's pre-critical project, whose aim is to reconcile natural science and speculative metaphysics.[11] They also reinforce Irigaray's suggestion that anxiety about an earth that moves is a central motivation for the development of Kant's philosophy. In these texts,

[8] Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, (tr.) J. Collie and J. Still (London: Athlone, 1992). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as EP.

[9] One of Kant's key aims is to avert unnecessary human suffering in the future by establishing the practical precautions that can be taken to reduce an earthquake's worst effects. He thus proposes that, as earthquakes seem to follow the lines of mountain ranges and major rivers, when Lisbon is rebuilt, it should be constructed at right angles to the Tagus rather than along its banks. (see E1, 420–21)

[10] Martin Schönfeld, *The Philosophy of the Young Kant: The Precritical Project* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 74–77. Kant's own preferred explanation of earthquakes involves an account of the inside of the earth as full of interconnected caverns and vaults, which are themselves filled with combustible materials and air. Once the latter become inflamed—which, on Kant's account, they all too easily do—the conflagration spreads through the underground passages in which it is enclosed, often under great pressure, and seeks outlets through the crust of the earth which therefore shakes, ruptures, and spews forth fire.

[11] See Schönfeld, *The Philosophy of the Young Kant*, 3.

Kant's concern to explain the movement of the earth (and seas) that resulted from the Lisbon quake leads to the attempt to integrate speculative moral horizons with causal material explanations, with not entirely successful results. Indeed, from an Irigarayan perspective, it is telling that Kant's efforts to find a theoretical frame capable of containing the rupturing powers of the earth result in a series of essays which themselves become rhetorically and conceptually fissured. Such volatility fuels Kant's later critical project, in which he seeks a more satisfactory resolution between causal and moral perspectives.

In all three essays, Kant's primary concern is—unsurprisingly—the disorder (*Unordnung*) produced both in Lisbon and across Europe by events that are extra-ordinary (*außerordentlich*). By compiling available reports, methodically considering each aspect of the quake and surrounding events, and setting out the most plausible scientific explanations, Kant seeks to show that these events are strictly speaking not extra-ordinary at all but in keeping with the laws of nature. We only take other kinds of hardship to be more natural, he says, because they are more familiar. (E2, 431) In principle, earthquakes are both understandable and, crucially, predictable.[12]

Unfortunately, these entirely natural disorders are matched by a troubling disorderliness of people's thoughts. Earthquakes may awaken a curiosity which is praiseworthy where it drives us to seek causal explanations, but they also induce such fear that they rob people of the capacity for reflection, leading them to indulge in superstitious fabrication.[13] Kant counters such foolishness with Newtonian science, "the happiest attempt…that human understand-

[12] The fragility of Kant's hopes for a causal theory making earthquakes predictable—and hence, non-extraordinary—is poignantly underscored by the devastating quakes in Haiti on January 12th, 2010 and Japan on March 11th, 2011. However, leaving aside the question of whether earthquakes will ever be fully predictable, events in 21st-century Haiti and Japan—no less than in 18th-century Lisbon—reveal the limits of causal explanation in another regard, for no such explanation ever seems adequate to either the catastrophic contingency or the full horror of such events. The rhetorical instability of Kant's essays itself testifies to this inadequacy by constantly supplementing scientific explanation with moral reflection, indicating the need for an evaluative, non-causal register so as to do justice to the event of an earthquake (rather than simply "explain" it).

[13] Kant is especially scathing of those who claim that "the earth has gone wildly off course [*die Erde habe* sich verrückt]" and moved nearer the sun. So far as Kant is concerned, it is not the earth that has gone off track but those who succumb to such "crazy dreams [*Träume eines* verrückten *Kopfs*]." (E3, 465; my emphases)

ing has yet made to come to know nature." (E3, 468) Newton has shown that the proper approach to determining natural forces and their effects lies in the methodical combination of observation and geometry. Kant's essays are at times almost obsessive in their attempt to draw on this scientific approach in order to measure the natural phenomena most often associated with earthquakes. Nonetheless, the Lisbon quake itself is positioned as an event *without* measure: history, Kant says, has provided no other example of an earthquake that spread so quickly and widely. (E2, 437) Despite—or perhaps because of—such unsettling incomparability, Kant provides numerous examples of sufficiently similar events to guide our judgment. Likewise, in the face of destruction without measure, the essays seek security in the quantifiable: inches, feet, rods, and fathoms, as well as grains, miles, a hair's breadth, and even the back of a knife are all invoked as possible standards of measurement. This very proliferation testifies to the degree of anxiety Kant is seeking to assuage, an anxiety that emerges particularly clearly when he discusses the way that the causes of earthquakes lie concealed "in the depths of the earth [*in dem Innern der Erde*]." (E1, 423) Thus he notes that: "We calmly live on ground whose foundations are violently shaken from time to time" (E1, 419), yet know almost nothing of the devastating forces that cause such disturbances, for although we are familiar with the surface of the earth, "we have another world beneath our feet, with which as yet we are hardly acquainted at all." (E2, 431)

The essays are full of images of the hidden, inner and concealed (*verborgen*, *innerst*, *verbirgt*); but this very language allows itself to be counterbalanced by a rhetoric of discovering and uncovering, seeing through and revealing (*entdecken*, *durchschauen*, *offenbaren*). Though their causes may be hidden, the earthquakes still reveal that the earth is full of caverns that extend in all directions. More importantly, the earthquakes show that even at her most violent, nature continues to offer herself for contemplation and thus remains "instructive [*lehrreich*]." (E2, 431) Our natural fear of earthquakes is thus offset not only by the faith that even *these* events are governed by laws of nature, but also by the hope that the earthquakes themselves, by exposing the inner workings of the earth, will help us discover the relevant laws: "What nature conceals from our eyes and our direct approaches, she herself uncovers through her effects." (E2, 432) Nature's apparent autonomy is recuperated through what she has to teach:

> Nature reveals herself [*entdeckt sich*] only bit by bit. We should not through impatience seek to guess at what she hides from us

> [*was sie vor uns verbirgt*] through fabrications [*Erdichtung*], but wait until she reveals [*offenbart*] her secrets in clear and indubitable effects. (E1, 426)

While we should respect nature's power to conceal, such patient restraint allows her to reveal herself to us in ways that allow *us* to grasp *her* all the more securely. As Sarah Kofman notes, an approach governed by respect can easily "serve as a cover for an operation of a completely different order, an operation of mastery."[14]

Perhaps the strangest aspect of the essays is the absence of any detailed discussion of the destruction of Lisbon itself. Kant does occasionally comment on the city's unfortunate geographical location, but he spends most of his time discussing either the causes of earthquakes in general, or the more distanced effects of the 1755 quake on the atmosphere, seas, and inland waters of Europe. His relative silence on the earthquake's catastrophic effects in Lisbon suggests that these too should be held at a distance rather than being approached too directly. Why this might be so is signalled in a key passage in the second essay. Some four pages in, having already given a brief account of the probable causes of earthquakes, Kant announces that he will begin, and that the story of the recent quake will be his starting point. (E2, 434) He immediately clarifies however that he will not be telling the story of the human misfortune caused by the earthquake; nor will he be constructing a list of destroyed cities and the inhabitants buried in their rubble. The story he has in mind is a natural history of causes and effects. Nonetheless, he tells us in some detail of the dramatic events of which he will not be telling, listing the different terrors that arise when the earth moves beneath our feet:

> One must gather together [*zusammen nehmen*] everything terrible that the imagination can represent [*sich vorstellen*] to picture [*vorzubilden*] in some measure [*einigermaßen*] the horror in which people must find themselves, when the earth under their feet is moved, when everything around them collapses, when wa-

---

[14] Sarah Kofman, "Kant and Respect for Women," *Social Research*, vol. 49, no. 2 (1982), 383–404. Kofman's comments arise in the course of her analysis of the role of respect in Kant's philosophy, in which she positions respect for women as a necessary preliminary to respect for the moral law which it "prefigures and recommends." (*ibid.*, 390) Yet at the same time, such respect allows the risks posed by the feminine to be held at a safe distance, protecting man from the threat of "letting oneself fall into sensuality" or "allowing the triumph of feeling over reason." (*ibid.*, 393)

> ter set in motion in its depths completes the misfortune by overflowing, when fear of death, despair on account of the complete loss of all one owns, and finally the sight of other poor wretches lays low the most steadfastly courageous of spirits. Such a story would be touching, it would perhaps, because it affects the heart, even have an improving effect on the latter. But I will leave this story to defter hands. (E2, 434)

The comment that we need to "gather together everything terrible" we can imagine if we are to be able to represent even "in some measure" the earthquake's immeasurable horror strikingly foreshadows Kant's later critical account of the failure of representation that triggers the sublime. Thus, one reason for not telling the story of this horror is that, to be truthful, it is un-tellable: the imagination cannot fully measure up to the task. Perhaps, then, Kant tells this horrifying tale in the only responsible way, that is, only under erasure and after signalling that any such attempt will be inadequate.

And yet, despite signalling the unrepresentable horror of events in Lisbon, and noting that it will be thought shocking to extol such events from the perspective of their usefulness (see E2, 455), Kant has no qualms about going on to do just that, suggesting that whatever damage may be done to us by earthquakes, this can "easily [*leichtlich*]" be compensated for by their uses, which he goes on to list in some detail. (E2, 456) Kant's general point, that the same material conditions that cause earthquakes also have beneficial effects for the environment, is not an unreasonable one. But the suggestion that such uses offset the damage earthquakes cause is not helped by the fact that the first example he gives is of the hot springs whose mineral properties can be beneficial to people's health. Even allowing for the important medicinal role of spa treatments in 18th-century Europe, it is hard to see how such springs and spa waters, no matter how beneficial their effects for the living, could "easily" balance out the kind of the catastrophic damage and loss of life that occurred in Lisbon.

Thus, while the essays are sharply critical of those who show a lack of proportion in their judgments about the material causes of earthquakes, Kant's own judgments about the human effects of such events are at times curiously dis-proportionate. This apparent insensitivity is compounded when he implies that in fact, it is those who are inconsolable in the face of the earthquake's devastation who have really gotten things out of proportion:

> As men, who were born to die, we cannot bear it that some have died in the earthquake, and as those who are strangers here and

> possess nothing of our own, we are inconsolable, that goods have been lost which would soon have been left behind anyway in the general course of nature. (E2, 456)

The purpose of these uncompromising reflections on mortality seems to be to encourage his reader to keep things in perspective, but the passage also constitutes a disavowal of the horror of the quake whose dismissive tone is at odds with Kant's earlier evocation of events too horrifying to represent and a touching story still to be told.

Such tensions pervade the essays. Several of these tensions are of particular interest in light of Irigaray's critique of Kant, as they show him to be wrestling with human beings' relation to physical, material nature as well as with the relation between the moral and material aspects of our existence. Thus, throughout the essays Kant emphasizes the need for humility in place of hubris: if the earthquake's effects are almost beyond measure, man's mistake, Kant says, is to think God intended him to be the sole measure of nature, as if God had only human beings in mind when setting up the rules that govern the natural world. (E2, 460) On the contrary, human beings are only part of nature and we should learn to accommodate ourselves to it, taking into account nature as a whole instead of judging it solely in relation to our own desires. (E2, 456, 460) Such passages point to a holistic approach which sees human beings as fully embedded within the material world in ways that are consonant with Irigaray's own philosophical commitments. However, in contrast to such a perspective, the earthquake essays are equally clear that man has a goal that raises him far above the whole of (material) nature. Thus, while it is hubristic to see ourselves as the centre of God's creation or to claim insight into his intentions, Kant has no hesitation in claiming that God, in his wisdom, has organized the world to serve the "far nobler goal" that is man's proper (moral) destination. (E2, 460) In language that points ahead to his account of the sublime (*das Erhabene*), Kant suggests that even the destructive power of nature finds its higher purpose in accordance with these "infinitely higher goals…which far transcend all natural means [*die unendlich höhere Zwecke…die weit über alle Naturmittel erhaben sind*]." (E2, 460)

Kant thus remains caught between emphasizing the limited and earthbound nature of human beings on the one hand, and their status as moral beings whose proper concerns transcend the earthly realm on the other. While the second essay accentuates the latter, the third is much more pessimistically focussed on the former, foregrounding the threat that continues to be posed to human life by an earth that is still full of unrest and whose powerful forces can too

easily burst through the fragile ground beneath our feet. In response to such excessive powers, Kant emphasizes the importance of accepting our own limits as knowing subjects: he apologizes to his readers for even discussing the theory that earthquakes can be ascribed to the influence of the planets, asking forgiveness for the fact "that I have led them so far afield into the firmament, in order to be able to judge properly about events which took place on our earth." (E3, 469) Instead, he says, we should "only enquire into the causes in the place where we live, we have the causes under our feet." (E3, 469) Such comments prefigure the later critical project with its insistence that knowledge is only possible within the limits of experience, a foreshadowing that is reinforced when Kant notes that it is worth taking the trouble to refute erroneous theories because this provides us with a "*purified* understanding [*ein* gereinigtes *Erkenntniß*]." (E3, 469; my emphasis)

Nonetheless, at the time of writing the earthquake essays, Kant had yet to find the two-world perspective embodied in the phenomena/noumena divide that would provide metaphysical justification for his account of human beings as split between an earthly existence and a moral vocation.[15] Instead, he appeals to rhetorical questions and dogmatic assertions about Providence to justify his claims about man's "nobler goal" in ways that undercut his supposed humility about divine intentions. At the same time, the acceptance of our limits as finite earthly creatures is seen as equally necessary, for this secures reliable judgment and grounds scientific enquiry in its proper earthly domain. This willing acceptance of self-imposed limits can be read as an attempt to offset the heteronomous limits imposed on us by natural forces over which we have little or no control. Yet the essays end on a more pessimistic note, with a reminder that man is characterized by an inquisitive boldness that is in no way matched by his capacities and of the humbling fact that, as Kant puts it, "he can never be anything more than human." (E3, 472)

This final comment is not necessarily at odds with the earlier emphasis on man's moral capacity: as later writings such as the *Groundwork* will affirm, it is only *because* man is not purely rational but merely a human being that he requires moral law and that moral

[15] See Schönfeld, who also notes the significance of the absence of this distinction from the pre-critical work: "The discovery of the subjectivity of space and time as a priori forms of intuition implied an ontological dualism between the sensible and the intelligible, which ruled out the notion of the unified nature that the precritical project had presupposed." Schönfeld, *The Philosophy of the Young Kant*, 6.

striving is an ongoing project for him. Nonetheless, Kant's final words link human striving to hubris and humiliation, casting doubt on how much faith we should place in man's capacity to strive beyond his material limits. Coming as they do at the end of all three essays, these concluding remarks suggest that the tension between man's material existence and his moral vocation is—at this point in Kant's thinking—far from fully resolved.

Sublime Tremors

We have to turn to the later writings on the sublime to find a more positive recuperation of human being in the face of nature's overwhelming might. This recuperation takes two forms. In the mathematical sublime, we encounter something which appears to be absolutely large and which thus arouses the idea of infinity. The imagination strives to match this idea but cannot, by definition, adequately capture the apparently *un*bounded within the bounds of representation. This inadequacy is not merely negative however, for as Kant insists, it is this very striving that arouses ideas that exceed any possible representation. (see CJ, 99, 109–14 [V: 245, 252–57]) As this power for ideas lies within us, the natural phenomenon that triggers this mode of aesthetic experience cannot properly be called sublime. Rather, sublimity is found within us too, in the consciousness we gain of our own power to think that which surpasses any standard of sense. (see CJ, 106, 111–17 [V: 250, 254–60])

Whereas in the earthquake essays, the struggle to gather together (*zusammen nehmen*) and represent the terrifying events in Lisbon leads Kant to set this story to one side, here such failure of comprehension (*Zusammenfassung, Zusammensetzung*) becomes a sign of our capacity to strive beyond what can be fully grasped and known via the senses. (CJ, 108–12 [V: 252–56]) Likewise, though Kant continues to affirm that the proper way to judge the phenomenal world is in terms of nature as a whole (CJ, 112 [V: 255]), now our very *in*ability to represent that whole points to a capacity to *think* nature in ways that go beyond what can be exhibited *in* or *by* nature. Thus in his account of the sublime, Kant takes a firmer stand on the issue of incomparability: strictly speaking, nothing in nature is incomparable because everything can be scaled up or down in relation to something else. (CJ, 106 [V: 250]) What is truly incomparable is our ability to reach beyond the very limits making representation and comparison possible. In other words, what is incomparable is the supersensible vocation exhibited in our capacity for ideas of reason, in contrast to which nature is "vanishingly small." (CJ, 114 [V: 257])

Such a move is only possible because of the Copernican turn. Whereas for the earlier Kant, it was man's duty to observe and understand nature, in his later work, the understanding actively gives the law to nature as the subject constitutes the objects of experience through the synthesizing work of the faculties.[16] Similarly, in the aesthetic experience described in the *Critique of Judgment*, we do not passively succumb to impressions of sublime objects but sublimity is produced in us by the interaction of the faculties with both appearances and each other. Unlike cognition, however, sublime feeling arises where we are *unable* to synthesize appearances into unified representations. Whereas such lack of comprehension was a destabilizing threat in the earthquake essays, in Kant's later work it can be recouped due to his clear division of the power to know and the power to think. Thus, although the possibility of knowledge remains dependent on a proper acceptance of the limits of experience, the encounter with the apparently formless or *un*limited can make us aware of a capacity to think that goes beyond experience, thereby providing affirmation of our "nobler goal."

A similar pattern can be discerned in the dynamic sublime, which more obviously speaks to the earthquake essays as here the trigger for sublime feeling is nature "in its wildest and most ruleless disarray." (CJ, 99–100 [V: 246]) The distancing that occurs in the earthquake essays through the strange absence of events in Lisbon is here formalized as a more explicit part of the theory: the sublime cannot arise when we feel actual fear, but requires a safe distance allowing for a purely aesthetic encounter. (CJ, 120 [V: 261]) The dynamic sublime occurs if, when presented with natural forces that have the power to destroy us physically, we respond not only by recognizing their fearfulness but also by recognizing our own capacity to overcome such fears and to refuse to allow them to determine us. In other words, we resist nature's *physically* irresistible might through an intensified awareness of our capacity to determine ourselves independently of nature, and hence of our capacity to strive to act morally, even in the face of the greatest (physical) danger. (CJ, 120–21 [V: 261–62]) The laws that govern nature are now counterbalanced—and in the end outweighed—by an awareness of the moral law we impose on ourselves.

Kant's later work thus reinforces his earlier view that nature's most fearful excesses should teach us that human beings ought not to be wholly determined by their material desires. The terms in

[16] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 148 [A126–27].

which this is expressed recall the second earthquake essay, where Kant suggests that the destruction of the very things that seem most important to us reminds us that earthly goods should not be our prime concern. Similarly, in the *Critique of Judgment* he writes that the sublime arises where nature

> calls forth our strength (which does not belong to nature [within us]), to regard as small the [objects] of our [natural] concerns: property, health, and life, and because of this we regard nature's might…as yet not having such dominance over us, as persons, that we should have to bow to it if our highest principles were at stake and we had to choose between upholding or abandoning them. (CJ, 121 [V: 262])

The critical difference is that, whereas in the earthquake essays, Kant fell back on dogmatic assertion and appeals to Providence to support his claims about man's "nobler goal," here he appeals to an active shift in perspective within the human subject. It is within our power "to *judge* ourselves independent of nature" and to "*regard*" material concerns as insignificant (CJ, 120–21 [V: 261–62]; my emphases), and what is sublime is just this capacity to imaginatively shift perspectives even in the face of nature's might.

The uneasy split between the moral and the material that fissures the earthquake essays is here re-negotiated by being internalized. Thus, even though the sublime may be triggered by the encounter with what Kant later calls "the abyss of the purposeless chaos of matter" (CJ, 342 [V: 452]), sublime feeling is not strictly speaking generated by such threatening excess, but by the conflict *within* the subject produced by the imagination's dual allegiances to sensibility and reason. By recognizing that our capacity to resist nature's might depends on our ability to actively overcome nature *within* (in the form of our own fearfulness), Kant secures the possibility of our superiority to nature *without* by turning it into a question of self-determination: we may not be able physically to overpower nature but we can always strive to be masters of ourselves.

If the sublime allows Kant to find a framework whereby counter-purposive nature becomes purposive by enabling us to re-affirm our moral vocation, this is not because he resolves the tension between materiality and morality by closing the rift between them. While this tension is internalized, it is not eliminated by simply sacrificing sensibility to reason; instead, it is made productive: it is only because the imagination answers to both sensibility and reason that sublime feeling can arise. In keeping with this, the tremors that shake the subject are now only superficially those of volcanoes and earth-

quakes. The real violence of the sublime is that which is done to the imagination. Sublime feeling is produced by vibrations within the subject that arise when the imagination is caught between the pain and pleasure, attraction and repulsion, fear and resistance that characterize the simultaneous failure and expansion of its powers. (see for example CJ, 115, 129 [V: 258, 269]) Likewise, the abyss is no longer a cleft in the earth; instead, nature *becomes* abyssal when the imagination tries to represent her apparent infinities as a whole. In thus striving to match reason's ideas, the imagination is allowed to "look outward toward the infinite, which for sensibility is an abyss." (CJ, 124 [V: 265]) Even the abyss is now internalized: it is what the imagination's striving must produce within the subject to confirm the inadequacy of sensibility to reason's power to think. It is this cleft within that secures both the incomparability of man's moral vocation and the possibility of its re-affirmation in sublime feeling.

When the Earth Moves beneath Our Feet

From Irigaray's perspective, the resolution of the material and the moral offered by the *Critique of Judgment* merely deepens the cleft that divides the Kantian subject from his origins in maternal matter. If we return to the passage from *Speculum* with which I began, we see how Irigaray positions the Copernican turn as turning us away from the ground, and hence, from our ties with material nature:

> To re-establish the balance that has been so dangerously disturbed, the philosopher decides that from now on nature overall will be put under the control of the human spirit and her origins will be based on her necessary obedience to the law. So the ground will now rest upon a transcendental ceiling that is propped up by the forms and rules of representation and is thus unshakable. (S, 203–204)

Irigaray's reading emphasizes the way that the *a priori* forms of intuition and the categories (the forms and rules of representation) provide a frame separating the form-giving activities of the subject from (what is seen as) the chaos of disorganized matter. The Kantian subject is thereby secured against a (supposedly) unformed materiality that it orders into a world of unified objects and comes to see as an organized system (nature). Yet because this subject must still be *given* the matter of sensation to work up into objective representations, it remains uneasily dependent on a material "otherness" from which it must carefully distance itself. Kant reinforces this depend-

ence of self on other when he argues that there can be no foundational moment of purely introspective self-certainty. On the contrary, for Kant, self-awareness is not possible without a correlative awareness of an external world.[17] This continued dependence on a material "other" and "outside" means that the anxieties of the earthquake essays have not completely disappeared. For whenever this "other" refuses to behave as it should—whenever matter seems to escape the forms and rules of representation—the subject fears being turned upside-down and losing his grip on the world—or worse, being thrown down into the abyss.

Yet on Irigaray's reading, even this abyss is a risk that is carefully contained. This is the task of the sublime, where, as we have seen, the imagination fails only *because* it strives to grasp infinity as a whole. Thus, as Irigaray notes, although the imagination

> might thus believe itself inferior to nature, impotent or maimed in comparison with nature's sovereign greatness and potency…a little analysis will prove that the imagination owes its weakness instead to its desire for reason to reunite the in-finite of the sensual world into one whole, and that its powerlessness is relative only to the Idea it forms about that world. (S, 209)

The pain felt by the imagination will thus "make a new pleasure possible" as "the imagination will surpass itself by representing the inaccessibility of the rational Idea." Hence, as Irigaray notes, in the sublime, "however negative the world or the imagination may be, the 'soul' – still – is enlarged." (S, 209) As in the earthquake essays, the initial threat posed by material nature is re-appropriated as a useful resource, although the beneficiary here is not mere physical health but the rational and moral life of the soul, which expands toward its supersensible and moral vocation. "Culture, also, is based upon this *abyss* that reason represents for the imaginary." (S, 210)

The abyss provides what Irigaray calls "the intervention of a spacing in negativity" that allows the subject to distance himself from the material and sensible aspects of existence (S, 209), whether in the form of his own sensations and inclinations, or the more obviously threatening power of earthquakes and volcanoes. For Irigaray, the abyss is thus symptomatic of the subject's constitutive desire to

---

[17] More precisely, according to Kant, empirical self-consciousness requires the presence of something permanent outside ourselves against which the temporal order of our changing inner states can be determined. Kant, "Refutation of Idealism," *Critique of Pure Reason*, 245–47 [B275–79].

repress his own dependence on material nature and cut himself off from a maternal materiality through which he was brought into the world. These material origins will themselves be re-grounded in the rules of representation that will henceforth constitute "nature," and, where nature resists such rules, she will be subordinated to the moral law through which man commands himself to hold her at a distance:

> Fear and awe of an all-powerful nature forbid man to touch his/the mother and reward his courage in resisting her attractions by granting him the right to judge himself independent. (S, 210)

While the internalized abyss may appear to be a painful negativity, in fact it allows the subject to overcome the sensible by temporarily blacking out potentially threatening links to material nature, and in particular, to the maternal materiality from which he was born. Irigaray suggests that it is *because* the subject wishes to reverse his natal condition—that is, "to reverse the anguish of being imprisoned within the other, of being placed inside the other"—that he projects a constitutive "other" outside the self, as bounded object or chaotic excess. (S, 137) He is even prepared to split himself in two so as to create an "outside" within himself, by identifying sensible inclination as the pathological other that reason must ideally overcome. In this way he seeks to invert the original condition of his existence whereby he begins inside an other, and instead ensure that "everything *outside* remains forever a condition making possible the image and the reproduction of the self." (S, 136) The Copernican turn is here presented as dependent on another—prior and unseen—reversal. On this reading, the so-called problem of affinity that arises in Kant's critical work, due to the possibility that appearances might not always fit the categories of thought, itself conceals a more primary "problem of affinity," found in the subject's relation to the body of the mother. From Irigaray's perspective, it is not surprising that in a letter to Schiller, Kant observes that the need for two sexes for the propagation of the species is for him "a sort of abyss of thought [*ein Abgrund des Denkens*]."[18]

---

[18] Letter to Schiller, March 30th, 1795, in *Kants Briefwechsel Band III*: *1795–1803*, *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, 29 vols., (ed.) der Königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. XII (Berlin: Walter Gruyter, 1922), 11. See also Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 71.

Adventures in the Abyss

Re-approached through Irigaray's reading of Kant, the earthquake essays become a highly over-determined terrain. Kant's concern that he knows so little about the inside of the earth becomes a screen for a more repressed anxiety about his own origins within the mother's body. His unease that nature might sometimes move of its own accord points to an unresolved relation to a maternal matter which pulses to its own rhythms, while the contractions that shake and fissure the ground recall the quaking movement of birth that man has come to see as a violation of his autonomous being. Read in this way, Kant's response to the earthquake can serve as a prompt for recalling maternal generative power, rather than for seeking a more powerful frame through which to sublate the threat that active matter poses to the rational subject. It is this recollective project in which Irigaray is engaged when she seeks both to reclaim active matter from the abyssal depths to which Kant's theory of the sublime consigns it, and to recall the constitutive materiality of our being as manifest in our sexuate corporeality and our maternal-material origins. One of the specific ways in which she seeks to undertake this project is by reworking the image of the abyss itself, together with the closely related "sublime" figures of nothingness and infinity.

Such reworkings are particularly striking in *Elemental Passions*, the short poetic text published eight years after *Speculum*. Written in the voice of an "I" who is also a "she," and addressed to a "you" who is, for the most part, a "he," this text can be read as offering a critical counterpart to Kant's use of the image of the abyss in his account of the sublime. *Elemental Passions* continues to trace the ways in which the masculine subject of western thought has denied its debt to birth by aligning the body of the mother with inert materiality. Rather than a generative source of life and becoming, this dead and frozen matter provides the necessary housing for man's form-giving activities. As Irigaray succinctly puts it, "You had form, I was matter for you." (EP, 60) Alongside this critique of the reduction of maternal matter to a hylomorphic resource, *Elemental Passions* also testifies to the ways in which, insofar as woman is the "other" of a male subject, she is "nothing" several times over. Not only does "she" have no being in her own right—"In the place where my being should take place there is at present nothingness" (EP, 50)—but because she is defined in relation to man, even where her differences *are* recognized, this is only to the extent that she fails to measure up to his ideal form. Woman is thus defined by what she lacks, whether this is sufficient rationality or the male sex organ. She is the site of a threat-

ening absence, or as Jan Montefiore puts it, "a frightful abyss of nothingness that negates definition."[19]

Yet this threatening void is also recuperated by the subject. It allows him to externalize the possibility of lack that would otherwise threaten his own self-sufficiency by projecting it onto an other: "You filled me with your emptiness. You filled me up with your lacks." (EP, 61) As in the sublime, the subject is able to re-secure the bounds of his own identity all the more firmly against this negative exteriority. By being identified with lack, woman operates to "safeguard" man's nothingness (EP, 82), both protecting him from it and acting as "that void which maintains your coherence." (EP, 20) Woman's sexuate specificity is obliterated, as instead she becomes "an incrustation of your nothingness." (EP, 11)

Despite these strategies of re-containment, woman opens up a gap in man's world that is not so easily recuperated, by belonging *to* it without ever appearing *in* it. The very fact that woman exists without her differences being recognized in their own terms holds open the possibility of another world, one which would remain undetermined by the (male) subject's gaze and in which woman's sexuate specificity would not simply disappear. Irigaray finds a reminder of this other world in that which is forgotten to secure the autonomy of the male subject, namely, the mother who gave birth to him, the woman who existed before him and in ways not wholly determinable *by* him.

Throughout *Elemental Passions*, Irigaray draws on images that recall the pregnant female body to explore the possibility of a space-time that does not belong to the unified subject:

---

[19] Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 142. As Montefiore's analysis suggests, Irigaray shows how this "nothingness that negates definition" is the inverse counterpart of the identification of woman with the mother as all-encompassing (pre-Oedipal) plenitude, a figure terrifying and comforting in equal parts. Irigaray is clear that such phantasies of maternal plenitude reduce woman to the "other" of the subject no less destructively than her identification with nothingness and lack. Nonetheless, Irigaray also locates the appeal of such phantasies (for women as well as men) in the fact that: "at least she is still *pregnant*/*full* [*pleine*]. Obviously, you will find opacity and resistance in the mother, even the repulsiveness of matter, the horror of blood, the ambivalence of milk, the threatening traces of the father's phallus, and even that hole that you left behind when you came into the world. But she – at least – is not nothing. She is not this vacuum (of) woman. This void of representation, this negation of all representation, this limit set on all present representations (of self)." (S, 228; quoted in Montefiore, 142–43; trans. mod. drawing on Montefiore)

> deeper than the greatest depths your daylight could imagine…. Neither permanently fixed, nor shifting and fickle. Nothing solid survives, yet that thickness responding to its own rhythms is not nothing. Quickening in movements both expected and unexpected. Your space, your time are unable to grasp their regularity or contain their foldings and unfoldings. (EP, 13)

Kant may be right to think there is another world within the depths of matter that resists the subject's objectifying calculations. In this fluid darkness, there may be nothing to be seen that fits the unifying "rules of representation" that secure that subject's gaze, but this does not mean there is nothing there at all. Instead, rhythmic movements generate dense patterns of folding and unfolding, holding together the space-time of a world without need to demarcate self and other through firm and impenetrable boundaries. This maternal fluidity resists the alignment of woman with inert matter that can be contained in fixed forms—or, as Irigaray puts it, "petrified in sublime rocks." (EP, 73) Yet equally, it refuses phantasies of amorphous plenitude: the maternal body is not "simply permeable to all, to everything." (EP, 72) The fluid movements Irigaray describes are rhythmic, not random: they cannot be reduced to a merely formless flow, or an excessive otherness lacking any determinable form at all. Instead, they figure the possibility of a different relation between self and other:

> I caress you, you caress me, without unity – neither yours, nor mine, nor ours. The envelope, which separates and divides us, fades away. Instead of a solid enclosure, it becomes fluid: which is far from nothing. This does not mean that we are merged. (EP, 59–60)

Here the singular identities of "I" and "you" do not depend on each being separated from the other. Yet, despite their lack of self-sufficient unity, they neither merge nor dissolve into nothingness. Rather, each is sustained *with* the other in fluid interrelation. While the space between them may not be solid, neither is it void nor vacuum; instead, Irigaray presents it as an "almost palpable density" (EP, 105), a thick fluidity shaped by rhythmic movements which articulate self and other together.

Thus, as Irigaray suggests, "This moving back through nothing is not nothing." (EP, 50) It is a re-appropriation of nothingness which suggests that where the subject who seeks contained and unified forms sees only chaos or lack, he betrays an inattentiveness to forms of space and time irreducible to his own. One of the features of this

other space-time is that the whole is not thought, even as an unrepresentable idea, as a unified or absolute totality. As we have seen, for the Kantian subject, nature's apparent boundlessness is re-contained by the projection of just such an idea.[20] As if in reply, Irigaray writes that:

> The whole is not the same for me as it is for you. For me, it can never be one. Can never be completed, always in-finite…. For me? A fluid expansion, never enclosed once and for all. (EP, 89)

The dynamics of the sublime which depend on the failure of one faculty to unify in representation what another unifies in thought are thereby broken. Instead of lifting herself above the limits imposed on us by nature through this higher power, the female subject of *Elemental Passions* situates the expansion of her imagination within an infinity of possibilities for becoming folded *into* finite matter.

Here transcendence no longer involves overcoming nature but nature overcoming itself in further becomings through which it becomes intimately other to itself. Unlike the subject split between body and mind, nature and culture, these fluid becomings are the enculturation of nature envisioned as "a body animated throughout." (EP, 99) Form is not imposed on inert matter, but emerges in the movements through which a fluid and mobile matter gives herself form. Though nature is conceived as "constantly moving life" (EP, 18), this is not a terrifying chaos of formlessness without measure; instead, forms are constantly redefined and renewed in "the melodious rhythm of half-opening which makes my measure limitless. Or limits a lack of measure." (EP, 85)

If man's striving for autonomy depends on forgetting his maternal origins, Irigaray re-locates a finite but no longer self-contained subject within a perpetual movement of becoming that constitutes a repetition and re-affirmation of birth. Infinity is no longer projected "beyond" this finite subject as an ever-receding series of points, nor is such enticing but destabilizing openness recuperated via the sublime idea of a totalizing whole.[21] Instead, the infinite is re-located

---

[20] One of the names Kant gives this absolute (but always ideal) totality of Nature is that of the goddess Isis. (see CJ, 185 n. 51 [V: 316])

[21] See EP, 71, 89: "Your infinity? An uninterrupted sequence of projected points. With nothing linking them. Emptiness. There would seem to be nothing there but production, recalling nothing, anticipating nothing. Points programmed as such indefinitely, on a background of absence. // What terrifies you? That lack of closure. From which springs your struggle against in-finity." "When you talk about Infinity, it seems to me that you are speaking of a closed totality: a solid,

within the finite as a constantly renewed opening that allows the flow of becomings to pass through one and another, transforming both in a "perpetual renascence." (EP, 53)[22]

It is as just such an opening that Irigaray re-figures the abyss. In keeping with her analysis in *Speculum*, *Elemental Passions* reminds us that the abyss, as it appears in Kant's sublime, structures a hierarchical movement of transcendence: "Those who aspire to superiority create the abyss." (EP, 73) The greater the threat posed by nature's abyssal appearances, the greater the self-determination required to rise above that threat. Woman continues to be aligned with this abyssal darkness, in which anything that differs from the subject is blacked out into homogeneous otherness:

> When I am speaking to you, I sense something like a dark and frozen chasm capable of engulfing everything. Slippery and bottomless. The fall of a night without illumination? The disappearance of the sun. That of your intellect? Of your understanding? Is what comes within the horizon of your day all that you can perceive? Nothing more. The rest – an abyss? (EP, 90)

Because he defines himself against his other, the subject cannot see another mode of being that does not define itself against him in the same way. Woman therefore remains an inevitable threat, as he can perceive her differences only as an otherness that negates his intelligible forms. Thus he faces "[t]he perpetual risk of falling back into the abyss" (EP, 54), "into the depths of me…. That great chasm which you imagine me to be and where you swallow me up." (EP, 36) As in the Kantian sublime, even the abyss has been appropriated in this relentless logic of the self-same, consumed by the subject to provide the dark shadow against which he defines his form.

In response, Irigaray reclaims the abyss as a figure of inassimilable difference. She does not pretend that this difference does not cause anxiety or that attending to it is without risk. Nonetheless, she

---

empty membrane which would gather and contain all possibilities. The absolute of self-identity – in which you were, will be, could be."

[22] See also EP, 16: "You forgot, left out of your economy whatever moves across boundaries from one to the other. For you, a limit exists, with some things under, some things over. Infinity is an aporia or an excess. // For me, nothing is ever finite. What does not pass through skin, between our skins, mingles in our bodies' fluids." On perpetual becoming as a repetition of the generative movement of birth, see also Irigaray's essay "Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato, *Symposium*, 'Diotima's Speech,'" in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, (tr.) C. Burke and G. C. Gill (London: Athlone, 1993), 20–33.

seeks to transform the abyss from an obliterating darkness into a reminder of irreducibility.

> But this difference creates an abyss. And is there anyone who does not fear the abyss? How can there be attraction between different beings in spite of the abyss? What risk is there in attraction through difference?
> Not in me but in our difference lies the abyss. We can never be sure of bridging the gap between us. But that is our adventure. (EP, 28)

Here the abyss is no longer located in woman as man's other. Instead, it shelters the irreducible difference between them.[23] Rather than a negative absence opposed to the presence of the subject, the abyss becomes a spacing between one and another that belongs to neither, but that prevents each from appropriating the other.

Irigaray's questioning voice calls on us to attend to this spacing. To do so would mean positioning the other as neither a threat, nor a projection of one's own desires, but to take the risk of relating to the other in and through their differences. In this way, the abyss becomes the space of a possible adventure in sexual difference capable of reconfiguring the relation between the sexes in ways that reduce neither to the terms of the other. Thus, whereas the sublime reinforces the way the Kantian subject is divided between material existence and moral reason, Irigaray reclaims the abyss for an ethics embodied in the cultivation of sexuate being. As a figure of inassimilable difference, the abyss is a reminder of the condition of such an ethics, as well as that which we need to attend to and nurture if we are to maintain the possibility of ethical relation.

The affective response appropriate to this reclaimed figure of the abyss is neither terror nor the negative pleasure of the sublime, but the passion of wonder as Irigaray elsewhere re-appropriates it from Descartes. In his essays on the Lisbon earthquake, Kant too notes that nature offers us much cause for wonder (*Bewunderung*) (E2,

---

[23] According to Irigaray, this difference is not easily found in relations between men and women as they are today, because contemporary gender relations are predominantly shaped by a culture which has been constituted by the *forgetting* of sexuate difference; hence, her re-appropriation of the abyss as a figure for irreducible difference should not be read as romanticizing current views of the "essential differences" between men and women. Rather, this re-appropriation is simultaneously recollective and projective, insofar as it recalls an ontological difference that—were we to cultivate it—would radically transform existing gender relations.

431), though here it is clear that the purpose of wonder is to provoke reflection that will make nature better known to us. For Irigaray, by contrast, cultivating wonder is a way of tending to difference as *in*assimilable. Wonder arises when we encounter difference within the world we think we know; if we let them, such differences can open us up beyond ourselves in what Irigaray calls: "A birth into a transcendence, that of the other, still in the world of the senses ('sensible'), still physical and carnal, and already spiritual."[24] For Irigaray, wonder "constitutes an *opening*" or "an interval" through which the sexes may relate in their difference, without assimilating one another: "Before and after appropriation, there is wonder."[25]

If the sexes are to relate to each other in this non-appropriative way, woman must be released from her role as "other" and object for a male subject and allowed to take up a position as a subject in her own right, in ways that do justice to her sexuate specificity. Hence the second way in which Irigaray transforms the image of the abyss, where she refigures its edges as two lips:

> What my lips were keeping is put into motion, into action – edges which touch each other, communicate with each other, without privileging the one or the other. (EP, 29)
> Touching myself again and again, I bring my edges together. But the one is no more the end than the other is the beginning. (EP, 75)

These passages echo the image of two lips that runs throughout Irigaray's work, most notably in her essay "When Our Lips Speak Together."[26] The image of the lips offers a way of figuring a female morphology in which woman is defined not as lack or absence, but in relation to herself. Thus reworked, the edges of the abyss become the lips through which a woman touches herself as they touch on each other, while the space between them is not devoid of form but allows for the fluid movements which change and shape both lips together without collapsing them into one. The abyss is thus transformed from a figure of negativity into a positive figure of female difference and specificity, a figure for an autonomy rooted in female auto-affection.

---

[24] Irigaray, "Wonder," in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, (tr.) C. Burke and G. C. Gill (London: Athlone, 1993), 74–82, here 82.
[25] *Ibid.*, 81, 73, 74.
[26] In Irigaray, *This Sex which Is Not One*, (tr.) C. Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 205–18.

Nonetheless, this autonomy would be no gain at all if it merely mirrored the unified form of the male subject. Thus one important function of the image of the lips lies in the way it provides an alternative to the model in which identity is secured by opposing one to another. Instead, each lip is inseparable from another with which it moves, yet without the two becoming simply indistinguishable. Inseparable yet not indistinct, they are neither one nor two, nor do they relate as subject to object:

> we are more than one. And two. The accounts overflow, calculation is lost. If neither I nor you are appropriated by the one or the other. (EP, 58–59)

Perhaps Kant was right to worry that the possibility of calculation might be lost in the abyss. For where eyes seeking unity might see only rupture, Irigaray sees both distinctness and contiguity: between the lips, there is no absolute division allowing one to be identified without the other, and instead, each lip moves and is moved by the other such that they are defined by their interrelations. In the movements which flow between them—which may be tremors and contractions, but also pulsations, vibrations, caresses—each remains in touch with the other while taking on its own form.

In their fluid interrelation, neither lip need mirror the other; while they move together and in ways that always affect each other, they need not move in the same way at the same time. As Irigaray puts it, the lips

> accompany the abyss, but do not meet each other there. They are re-doubled before the time of any mirror. They seem to mime each other. But the separation which permits that miming is still foreign to them….
> The wall between them is porous. It allows passage. (EP, 66)

Thus *Elemental Passions* presents the lips as "[o]utside any possible symmetry or inversion." (EP, 63) In fact, the figure of the lips introduces a dissymmetry twice over, in ways that release woman from her role as the other of the same by making it possible for her to become other to "the other." For not only do the lips not mirror one another, but in their fluid becoming, they figure a *process* of self-constitution that neither reflects nor inverts the oppositional divide through which the male subject is formed. Instead, self takes shape together with otherness which it neither consumes nor excludes, but with which it remains in responsive and intimate contact.

In Conclusion

Irigaray charges the male order of the subject and the sublime with "freez[ing] the mobility of relations between. It produces discontinuity. Peaks, pikes, fissures." (EP, 90) In contrast, her refiguring presents the abyss as gathering and shaping differences together rather than cleaving and rupturing; its edges become lips which remain in contact without being the same, while the space between them is transformed from the negativity of a void to a fluid density allowing transformative relations without the appropriative elimination of differences.

Despite the value of such transformations for an affirmation of difference, it might still be objected that Irigaray's recuperation of the abyss disavows the terror and catastrophe with which Kant at least wrestles, even if his essays in the end fail to do justice to the earthquake as abyssal event—that is, as an interruption of our being which forces us to attend to being's precarious contingency. However, Irigaray's concern is not to deny the catastrophic power of such events, but to prevent sexual difference from being reduced to catastrophe such that the specificity of female being is consigned to abyssal darkness. Nonetheless, she remains attentive to the risks implicit in the abyss even when reworked as a figure for irreducible difference. Moreover, her project fundamentally challenges the tendency of Kant's philosophy (as well as substance metaphysics more generally) to regard *any* autonomous, unpredictable movement of the earth or material nature as inherently catastrophic: this tendency is precisely what forecloses the possibility of attending to the singularity of events such as the Lisbon quake by making it impossible to distinguish the rupturing force of catastrophe from animate and life-sustaining difference. It is this identification of active matter with the *necessarily* catastrophic which Irigaray contests.

Thus, in contrast to the violent upheavals of the earth against which the Kantian subject is constitutively secured, in Irigaray's reworked figures of the sublime, active matter (or matter's activity) becomes first and foremost a fluid *giving* of forms. This is not to deny that such forms can be ruptured or dissolved, but to insist on recalling how they (and we) first emerged, through the generative movements of a generative matter. On this approach, matter is no longer split between threatening chaos and deadly inertia, while infinity is no longer projected outside a unified subject but erupts within the finite to transform beings who are never closed and complete, neither one nor two. For such singular yet intertwined beings, caught up and sustained in material becomings, the sublime

encounter with an earth that moves need not necessarily be horrifying or traumatic, but may instead hold the promise of transformative and even shared adventures in difference:

> I take pleasure and you take pleasure in these differences, in this difference, as in an overabundance of riches. (EP, 58)

rjones23@gmu.edu